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INVASIVE ALIEN PLANT PROGRAM ACHIEVES GOALS

As the Invasive Alien Plant Program nears the end of a two-year Agri-Environmental Group Plan (AEGP) project, staff reflect upon the successes that have helped to exclude, eradicate and contain weeds that threaten the quality of forage plants and alter habitats for desirable plants, wildlife and livestock.

The Invasive Alien Plant project is an AEGP project that was funded under the environmental pillar of the Agriculture Policy Framework and jointly managed by Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM) and Saskatchewan Agriculture.

Invasive alien plants (IAPs) are weeds that have migrated to North America from overseas. According to Harvey Anderson, Group Planning Advisor with the AEGP - Invasive Alien Plant project, one of the reasons these plants become a serious problem is they are not under pressure from the natural enemies that would be present in their native habitats. As a result, following a naturalization process that can last from a handful to more than 50 years, they expand aggressively and threaten Saskatchewan's own native plants and crops.

The approach used to combat IAPs evolves through various phases, including "early detection and eradication" when populations are new and small, "containment and integrated control," once they are established and spreading, and "coping" once they are widespread. Integrated weed control is a critical component of management during both the containment and coping phases.

According to Anderson, integrated weed management programs, depending on habitat, can employ a variety of tools, including herbicides, biological controls, cultural controls such as cultivation, mechanical controls such as mowing, and selected grazing. When these are used in a non-conflicting way, they can be very effective.

"Using these techniques in the proper order and timeframe will make up your total package for management," Anderson said. However, he cautions against becoming overly reliant on herbicides, as they are only one of the many tools available. Herbicides are often the more costly and, usually, short-term solution.

Rural municipalities are among the most important partners in weed control. *The Noxious Weed Act* names 41 plants that property owners are required to control, most of which are invasive alien species. RMs are empowered with the authority to enforce this legislation through the appointment of a weed inspector.

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Over time, weed inspectors have increased their levels of training, which has contributed to the success in managing invasive plants more effectively. In addition, many municipalities have banded together into Co-operative Weed Management Areas in order to co-ordinate their efforts on weed management and to achieve economies of scale. By sharing a weed inspector, there is more uniform control over a wider area. Leading-edge municipalities have even begun exploring longer-term weed management plans as a part of the AEGP Invasive Alien Plant project, and bringing other stakeholder partners into the discussion on IAPS as well.

Other achievements which Anderson notes have contributed to the success of the AEGP Invasive Plant project include the increasing participation of First Nations and the introduction of hand-held GPS units and electronic mapping systems to help document the most important "pathways of spread," or methods of movement.

Upon completion of the timeframe set out in the AEGP-IAP project, Anderson is hopeful that activities will continue because of the plan's effectiveness.

"Right now, the environment and biodiversity are higher priorities, both with the provincial and federal governments and, I think, with average taxpayers," he stated. "I am hopeful that funding for this type of project can be maintained, to continue the momentum that has been started."

Additionally, Anderson hopes that more producers and organizations will become involved in an Invasive Plant Council being organized by the Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan (NPSS).

"I encourage corporations that care about or are affected by invasive weeds to get involved in the Invasive Plant Council and contribute towards its success," he said. To find out more about the role of the council, interested parties should contact the NPSS at (306) 668-3940.

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For more information, contact:

Harvey Anderson, Group Planning Advisor
Agri-Environmental Group Plan - Invasive Alien Plants
Phone: (306) 933-7695
E-mail: harvey.anderson@gov.sk.ca